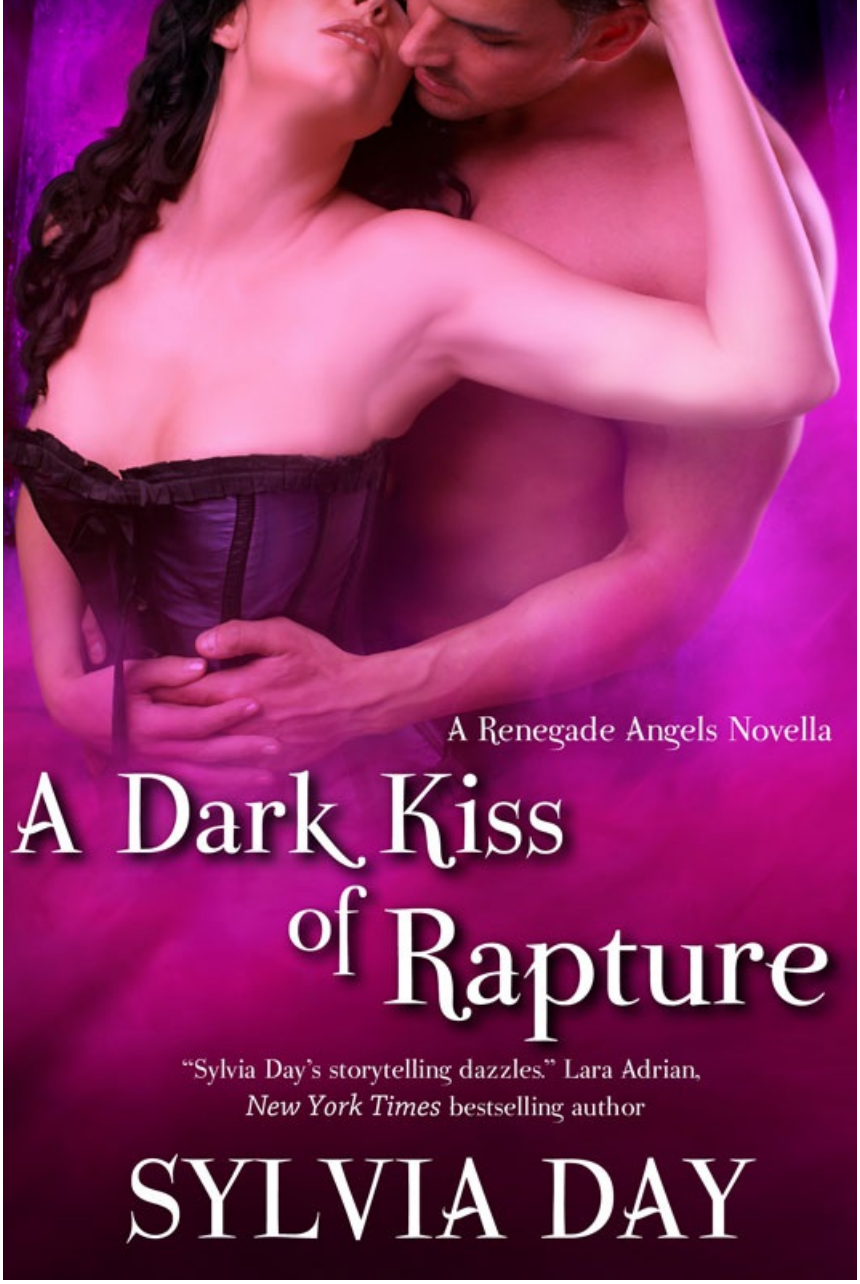

A Renegade Angels Novella

A Dark Kiss of Rapture

"Sylvia Day's storytelling dazzles." Lara Adrian,
New York Times bestselling author

SYLVIA DAY

A DARK KISS OF RAPTURE

A Renegade Angels Novella

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Praise for the Renegade Angels Series

Praise for *A Touch of Crimson*

"*A Touch of Crimson* will rock readers with a stunning new world, a hot-blooded hero, and a strong, kick-ass heroine. This is Sylvia Day at the top of her game!"

—Larissa Ione, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Angels and demons, vampires and lycans, all set against an inventive, intriguing story world that hooked me from the first page. Balancing action and romance, humor and hot sensuality, Sylvia Day's storytelling dazzles. I can't wait to read more about this league of sexy, dangerous guardian angels and the fascinating world they inhabit. *A Touch of Crimson* is a paranormal romance lover's feast!"

—Lara Adrian, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Sylvia Day spins a gorgeous adventure in *A Touch of Crimson* that combines gritty, exciting storytelling with soaring lyricism. Adrian is my favorite kind of hero — an alpha male angel determined to win the heart of his heroine, Lindsay, while protecting her from his lethal enemy. Lindsay is a gutsy, likable woman with paranormal abilities of her own, as well as a dedication to protecting humanity against a race of demonic monsters. This is definitely a book for your keeper shelf."

—Angela Knight, *New York Times* bestselling author

"*A Touch of Crimson* explodes with passion and heat. A hot, sexy angel to die for and a gutsy heroine make for one exciting read!"

—Cheyenne McCray, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Only Day can take a reincarnation plot and make it a gripping, touching and scintillating page-turner. She skillfully blends a timeless tale of love lost and found. *A Touch of Crimson* is a perfect romance with excellent worldbuilding rich with angels, lycans and vampires."

—*RT Book Reviews*

Praise for Sylvia Day writing as S.J. Day

"Great characters and terrific storytelling in a hot-blooded adrenaline ride. A keep-you-up-all-night read."

—Patricia Briggs, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

"Exhilarating adventure in an edgy world of angels and demons...will keep readers enthralled."

—*Publishers Weekly*

THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Day is the national bestselling, award-winning author of over a dozen novels written across multiple sub-genres. A wife and mother of two, she is a former Russian linguist for the U.S. Army Military Intelligence. Sylvia's work has been called an "exhilarating adventure" by *Publishers Weekly* and "wickedly entertaining" by *Booklist*. Her stories have been translated into Russian, Japanese, Portuguese, German, Czech, Italian, and Thai. She's been honored with the *Romantic Times* Reviewers' Choice Award, the EPPIE award, the National Readers' Choice Award, the Readers' Crown, and multiple finalist nominations for Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA Award of Excellence.

Sylvia also writes under the pseudonyms S. J. Day and Livia Dare.

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GLOSSARY

CHANGE—the process a mortal undergoes to become a *vampire*.

FALLEN—the *Watchers* after the fall from grace. They have been stripped of their wings and their souls, leaving them as immortal blood drinkers who cannot procreate.

LYCANS—a subgroup of the *Fallen* who were spared vampirism by agreeing to serve the *Sentinels*. They were transfused with demon blood, which restored their souls but made them mortal. They can shape-shift and procreate.

MINION—a mortal who has been *Changed* into a vampire by one of the *Fallen*. Most mortals do not adjust well and become rabid. Unlike the *Fallen*, they cannot tolerate sunlight.

NAPHIL—singular of *nephalim*.

NEPHALIM—the children of mortal and *Watcher* parents. Their blood drinking contributed to and inspired the vampiric punishment of the *Fallen*.

SENTINELS—an elite special ops unit of the *seraphim*, tasked with enforcing the punishment of the *Watchers*.

SERAPH—singular of *seraphim*.

SERAPHIM—the highest rank of angel in the angelic hierarchy.

VAMPIRES—a term that encompasses both the *Fallen* and their *minions*.

WATCHERS—two hundred *seraphim* angels sent to earth at the beginning of time to observe mortals. They violated the laws by taking mortals as mates and were punished with an eternity on earth as *vampires* with no possibility of forgiveness.

Go tell the Watchers of heaven, who have deserted the lofty sky, and their holy everlasting station, who have been polluted with women, and have done as the sons of men do, by taking to themselves wives, and who have been greatly corrupted on the earth; that on the earth they shall never obtain peace and remission of sin. For they shall not rejoice in their offspring; they shall behold the slaughter of their beloved; shall lament for the destruction of their sons; and shall petition for ever; but shall not obtain mercy and peace.

The Book of Enoch 12:5–7

CHAPTER 1

Raze's night had been going pretty well, until the woman he'd just spent four hours fucking stumbled across a naked, disemboweled body on his doorstep. Her scream had shattered the serenity of the predawn, forcing him to knock her out before she drew a crowd. Now, as the sun stretched sleepy tendrils of light over the horizon, he stood over the corpse and struggled to contain his roiling fury.

"Dumped on my goddamn porch like trash." He ran both hands over his shaved head. "Poor bastard."

"Guesstimate of the time your gift arrived?" Vashti asked, her stiletto-heeled boots tapping out an impatient staccato as she paced. Her crimson hair swayed around her shoulder blades, the vividly-hued tresses the only wash of color against her skintight, all-black jumpsuit. She was a comic book aficionado's wet dream, with her lush tits and ass offset by a fallen angel's incomparable beauty. Her appearance was as lethal as the twin katanas she often wore in crisscrossing sheaths on her back, her physical beauty another weapon in the arsenal she used as second-in-command of the entire vampire nation.

"Hell if I know," he bit out. "There was nothing out of place when I got home at midnight. He was found at four."

"You didn't hear anything? Nothing at all?"

Raze scowled. He had a squeaky board on his front porch and everyone knew it. Even if they ruled out the benefit of his vampire hearing, his powerful sense of smell should have picked up on the freshly spilled blood. "No. Christ. If I'd heard anything I would have caught the fuckers."

Damned if he'd tell her that it hadn't been possible to hear anything over the woman moaning beneath him and the steady banging of his headboard against the wall as he pounded into her. The smell of hot sex, dripping sweat, and semen filled-latex had saturated the air along with the scent of the blood he'd drunk from her—a lover whose name he couldn't remember now. It shamed him that the broken body on his doorstop had been lost among the sexual excess.

He stared at his name carved into the corpse's left biceps and the cattle-branded monogram he recognized as the mark of a vampire known as Grimm. A growl rumbled up from his chest. Even without the mutilation, the victim was Raze's now. He would stand for the man and the vengeance due him. "I almost wish Grimm was still alive so I could kill him again."

"You've got enough on your plate dealing with his minions," Syre said, entering the room soundlessly.

Despite the hour, the vampire leader looked flawless. Even in casual dark jeans and a plain T-shirt, there was an elegance to him that was regal and commanding. Raze would brave the pits of hell for Syre if he commanded it. They'd come to earth together, fallen together, lost their wings together. Two hundred of them. And there wasn't one of the Fallen who wouldn't give their life for their leader. From the heights of grace as Watchers to the fall that cursed them with vampirism, Syre led them forward with a confidence that inspired them all.

Vash's pacing came to an abrupt halt. "Do we have any idea how many minions we're talking about here? How many have you taken out so far, Raze?"

"A dozen pairs, give or take a few. Adrian was on it, too," he said, referring to the angel who'd severed Syre's wings. Raze had a lot of reasons to resent Adrian, as well as the Sentinel angels who served under him—the Fallen's vampiric punishment being the least of it—but there was no denying that when they were aligned and hunting the same prey, Adrian's involvement was a benefit.

Syre crossed his arms and looked at Vashti, his second-in-command. "Remind me: how long did Grimm evade our attention?"

"Too fucking long. He was in our faces, but I didn't look deep enough. On the surface, his theory had merit. Still does. Or maybe it's wishful thinking. With the number of minions we lose to madness during the Change from fledgling to vampire, I'd like to think there's some way to cut the waste. He wrapped his dogma up with pseudoscience and I bought it."

"He was the one pairing fledglings into couples to ease the transition? I remember discussing it with you. He had enough success in the beginning to justify allowing him to proceed, if I recall."

Raze shot her a chastising glance for being hard on herself. "If you were looking for a ball and chain, and vampirism was one of your requirements in a perfect mate, Grimm was the man to see. He had personality profiles, compatibility charts, etc. All of which he used to weed out the whack jobs so he could pair them with nutcases. I knew his doctrine was dangerous, so when I took him out I hunted down all his disciples, too. Whoever is responsible for this, Grimm didn't document them the way he did the others."

"Disciples," Syre murmured. "Interesting word choice."

"It's the right word, trust me. What else would you call the followers of an idiot playacting as a messiah preaching revolt against you?"

Syre ran a hand through his thick black hair, the only sign he gave of any disquiet. "Whoever is responsible, they came directly to you. This is personal."

"You're goddamned right it's personal." He looked at the body again, knowing it wasn't merely a taunt but a message. "Help me turn this guy over."

Syre stepped forward, waving Vash back.

It was a gruesome task. The smell emanating from the open body cavity would torture a human; for a vampire, it was pure hell. They got as far as getting the corpse onto its side. Then the loosened entrails slid out with a soft sucking sound, and they both leaped back and away. Raze had eviscerated his own share of enemies, but this man was a victim, and that made all the difference.

"Do you guys need a hand?" Vash asked, stepping up to them.

"No." Raze had seen the tattoo on the corpse's shoulder blade. Unlike Grimm's brand, the ink was a mark the man had voluntarily applied as a show of loyalty, affection, and team spirit.

"The Cubs," he muttered. "Guess I'm heading to Chicago."

CHAPTER 2

Raze hit the ground running in the Windy City. Within an hour of his plane landing, he'd swept through the building that had once housed Grimm's operation (presently a printing shop) and checked his way through a quarter of the list of Grimm's known haunts. Then, impatient, he took a chance and headed to Wrigley Field.

Although the ballpark was dark and quiet for the night, Raze knew wrong when he came across it and he damn well felt it as he drove by. Parking a few streets away, he slid out from behind the wheel and opened the back door of his rental to grab his blades. He strapped them on with the efficiency of long practice: daggers on each thigh and two katanas crisscrossing his back. Then he darted over on foot, moving so quickly the mortal eye couldn't catch him.

As he approached, he picked up the faint sound of a melodious male voice coming from the field, followed by a chorus of murmurs in reply—sounds too slight for anything but a vampire's hearing to catch. Grimm had been big on staging, too, which made Raze wonder just how closely this protégé had been to Grimm and how long he or she had been working in the shadows.

He rounded the back of the ballpark and climbed up the rear of the bleachers. Pulling his head up over the top, he looked down at the darkened field below. A lone man stood before a group of approximately two hundred robed and kneeling minions. Segmented into pairs with the men in black and the women in red, they formed a perfect pattern of stripes in the center of the field.

Raze listened to a couple lines of bullshit about the supremacy of the vampire nation, then he tuned it out and focused on the leader. The man was tall and lean, dark-haired and dressed in a three-piece suit. He had a mesmerizing cadence to his speech, a lulling sonorousness that was evident even though Raze had stopped picking out the words.

He debated his next step, knowing this was an elaborate trap for him, one that would be designed with the expectation that he wouldn't come alone. Which was why he'd done exactly that.

But he could still take them by surprise.

Pulling out his phone, he jumped the hoops necessary to reach Adrian.

"Mitchell," the Sentinel leader answered.

"It's Raze. I've got a situation you'll be interested in."

"Where are you?"

"Chicago."

"Yes, that is interesting. So am I."

Raze stilled, his hackles rising at the softness of Adrian's tone. "That's not a coincidence."

"No, it's not. Location?"

He wasn't surprised that the angel was so far from his home base in Anaheim, California. That was Adrian's way. While Syre was cerebral in his leadership, using Raze and Salem to investigate and Vashti as his iron fist, Adrian was the opposite. The Sentinel leader left the administrative duties to others so he could remain a hands-on hunter in the field. A vampire hunter and goaler—those roles being the sole purpose of his existence.

Raze gave his location, then pointed out, "I wouldn't have called you if I just needed a hand or two. If you're going to send a couple lycans and call it a night, don't bother."

"Don't tell me how to respond to a request for a favor." The lack of inflection in the angel's voice was more disconcerting than an outright threat would have been.

"If you'd let us establish some cabals and covens in the major cities, I wouldn't need to call you at all." The Sentinels used their lycans to keep vampires contained in rural, lower population areas. They said the policy was to protect mortals, but the side effect was the hindering of the Fallen's ability to police their own minions. And every transgression was another mark against them, another smudge barring them from any possibility of redemption.

"How many more rogue minions would there be if vampires were allowed access to such a smorgasbord of food? The spread would become uncontainable. It's already out of control as it is or you wouldn't be calling me."

The line died, leaving Raze cursing at his cell phone. One of these days, he and the angel were going to have it out. But not tonight.

As the couples swayed like hypnotized king cobras, Raze leaped over onto the uppermost bench, then started taking the stairs down, applauding as he went. "Man, you've really got your delivery down. I mean, I could almost buy it... if I was a whacked out moron."

The man lifted his head and looked at Raze, his eyes glowing in the darkness. "Raze, how nice of you to join us. We've been expecting you. You are, after all, the guest of honor."

Although the distance between them was great, neither of them needed to raise their voices to be heard. "I'd say I was more of a bouncer. One who's going to bounce all your nutty asses into Hell."

"Where are your friends? Surely you didn't come to such an occasion alone?"

"Yeah, it's just me. I tried to round up more of a party, but everyone said it'd be a dud. They were right." Although he kept his descent easy and casual, Raze was hyperaware of new participants to the game as black-clad minions crawled toward him like ants. "Who are you?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"Nope. You don't ring any bells." He could tell being forgotten really chafed and that made him smile. In the back of his mind, he considered the possibility that Adrian might leave him hanging in the wind—the Sentinel hadn't actually agreed to show up. But Raze had no choice but to proceed as if reinforcements were on the way. "Why don't you enlighten me?"

"That's my goal." The man walked closer, his arms extended in dramatic fashion. "The Fallen are so busy wishing to be the angels you once were that you never enjoy being what you are."

Raze pulled one katana out of its sheath, the moonlight glinting off the silver-plated blade. "The only thing I don't like about what I am now is how much time I have to waste hunting dickheads like you."

"Ah... you'd prefer to continue your quest to fuck everything willing to sate your lust. Of all the Fallen, you're one of the most pitiable. At least the others fell for love. You fell only because you can't keep you dick out of warm, wet holes."

Pivoting, Raze sliced the head off the minion who'd attempted to come at him from behind. He took out two more who lunged from the sides, his speed and strength fueled by the bitter truth that had been thrown in his face. Grimm's eternal love bullshit was why Raze had volunteered to hunt him down to begin with. The twisting of love to achieve an even more twisted end stirred violence and fury inside him. He'd watched his fellow Watchers give up their wings for it, and Grimm's doctrine made a mockery of that terrible, heartrending sacrifice.

"See how he slays the bravest of us?" the idiot prophet asked his minions. "His own people. Weakening us from within. This is who we've elected to follow and yet they lead us nowhere! We remain in the shadows, hidden from the world, while—"

"Are you going to shut him up," Adrian asked, landing gracefully on a bench and swatting away the incoming surge of minions with an impatient swat of his massive wings, "or is that what you needed me for?"

The vampires on the field had staggered to their feet when Adrian appeared and now they scrambled in every direction. It was a natural, instinctive urge to run from an apex predator, but the Sentinel leader himself inspired a unique awe and fear. Like Syre, Adrian had been blessed by the Creator, gifted with a face and form that was the height of angelic perfection. The thirty-foot expanse of his alabaster wings glimmered in the moonlight, the pure pristine white of the feathers framed by crimson tips, as if he'd trailed the edges through freshly spilled blood. That band of red was a vivid reminder of what he was—a weapon tasked with punishing the Fallen and containing their minions.

"He's mine." Raze raced down the steps and vaulted onto the field at the same moment a dozen lycans in lupine form hit the grass, converging on the panicked mass. He went after the leader, who surprisingly stood his ground and faced off with a pistol in hand.

"I could change your life, Raze."

"Gimme your name."

"Does it matter?"

Raze shrugged and twirled his blade with practiced ease. "Always good to have a name to go with a kill."

The man smiled. "You won't kill me. You need me to tell you if there are more of us, and if so, how many more and where they are. And I won't kill you because I need you, too. If you'd think outside the box, you'd realize that you could be the cornerstone of massive, sweeping advancement. You could have the mate you deserve. You could—"

"You don't know what I deserve."

"Don't make me hurt you, Raze." He looked over Raze's shoulder and his smile widened. "You surprised me by bringing in the Sentinels and their dogs, but we had to get rid of them at some point. Now is as good a time as any."

Using the man's distraction, Raze whipped out the blade strapped to his left thigh and threw it, striking the prophet in the throat. The gun discharged. Pain ripped through Raze along with the bullet that shot clear through his shoulder and out the other side. The wound healed almost instantly, proving the man's words to be true: he didn't want Raze dead or he'd have used a silver-laced bullet.

Behind him, the field erupted with the sounds of gunfire and the yelps of wounded lycans. Raze dropped to the ground. As the robe-clad minions utilized the weapons they'd hidden beneath their robes, his mind quickly assessed his options. Adrian and a female Sentinel took to the field, their wings deflecting bullets and slashing like blades. Screams rent the air. Bodies were severed into pieces.

Most minions never knew what it was like to face a Sentinel. They could never prepare for the lethality of those magnificent wings that sliced like blades and were impervious to all mortal implements of destruction. Unique to each angel, the patterns and colors said much about the angel's soul if you knew how to read them, and their average thirty-foot span meant it was nearly impossible to get close enough to inflict any damage.

Raze took out a minion with his other knife, then crawled to the body of the prophet and took his gun. Lying on his back, he emptied the clip into the converging mass of robe-clad figures, slowing them down so that he could join the fray with his swords. Leaping to his feet, he did just that, cutting a swathe through the chaos.

Blood spurted and flowed like a river, soaking the grass and splattering Raze until he dripped with it. It was over in moments, leaving a battlefield upon which two Sentinels stood inviolate, surrounded by snarling lycans and a sea of dead bodies.

Raze pointed the tip of his blade at the two minions he'd managed to spare. "For you two," he murmured, "the fun is just beginning."

* * *

Raze made it back to his hotel just before dawn. He showered again, finishing the job he'd started with a hosing down at the field. Restlessness gnawed at him. The hunt wasn't over. What troubled him was that he had no idea what it would take to end it. How many more of Grimm's devotees were out there?

Tugging on a pair of black sweats, he propped up his iPad and placed a call to Vashti.

"Hey," he greeted her, when her face came on screen.

"Hey yourself." Her gaze narrowed. "You're looking rough. What's up?"

It was hard for a vampire to look rough. He was surprised that she said he did, but he brushed past it and caught her up on the night's events.

"You killed him?" She leaned back into her sofa cushions. It was rare for her to indulge in any downtime, so rare that it took him a moment to pinpoint her location as her home in Raceport. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. After what they did to the man they left on my porch, he got off easy. I made it quick and painless."

Her brow rose. "O-kay... But who's going to give you intel now that the two minions you captured gave up a whole lotta nada?"

"I got his name. Eventually, I'll have his mate." His mouth curved without humor. "Baron has to have one, if only to practice what he preaches."

"Maybe you killed her tonight. Surely she would have been there."

"She wasn't on the field. Trust me, if you'd have seen the way they were dressed and lined up, you'd know that everyone was paired except for him. I agree she was probably there somewhere, but she kept out of sight."

"So how are you going to find Mrs. Baron?"

"I'm emailing you his prints." Sitting back, he ran a hand over his shaven head. "It's probably a long shot to hope they registered when they mated, but it won't hurt to check. I'm also sending you a video. They recorded the killing that brought me here. I found it on a jump drive bracelet Baron was wearing. The recording shows a blond woman doing the deed, but I can't be sure that's legit because they sent a doctored version to Adrian that shows me as the killer. That's what brought him to Chicago."

Vash whistled. "They set you up."

"My guess is Adrian was leverage. Baron was under the impression that Syre will do just about anything to stay in Adrian's good graces, including throwing me under the bus. I think his plan was to offer me a mate and sanctuary from the Sentinels after Syre washed his hands of me."

"You got all that in the few minutes you let him breathe?"

"He wouldn't shut up. One of those assholes who likes to listen to himself talk."

"All right. I'll have Torque look at the prints and video, see what he can dig up. You gonna hang around Chicago for a while?"

He nodded. The data search was in good hands with Torque, Syre's son. No one dug up intel better or faster. The rest would be up to Raze. "I'll wait to hear back from Torque and spend some time on the streets. Maybe they'll come to me."

"Watch your back." Crossing her long legs on the couch, she leaned toward the screen. "And don't trust Adrian. He'll throw you under the bus, too."

Touching a finger to his brow in salute, he acknowledged the warning and signed off.

CHAPTER 3

When he was asked later what drew him to the small jazz club in an upscale part of Chicago, Raze didn't have an answer. The place wasn't his style with its small round tables, live singer, and elegant patrons. But he'd been drawn to it and the sultry voice of the female entertainer that floated into the street on the night breeze. Maybe because it was so different from the hard-edged clubs Torque helmed that gave fledglings a safe place to find blood and sex, and—most importantly—register their name and sire for the records. Raze thought maybe what he needed was a palate cleanser. Something different.

Damn it. He was restless and unsettled. He could barely stand to be in his hotel room. Even with the television on and the internet at his fingertips, he felt isolated and stifled. He was beginning to wonder if Baron's bullet had been tainted in some way. It wasn't like him to... brood. As endless as his life was, he still didn't have time to waste being a pain in his own ass.

He paid the club's cover charge and went inside, discovering a small open space with rust colored walls adorned with massive impressionist canvases. Pendant lights offered intimate illumination, except for at the bar, where the blue glass shelves were lit with bright white light. The floor was covered in multicolored mosaic tiles and patrons danced freely wherever they found an open space, giving the whole establishment a comfortable bohemian feel.

Sliding onto a barstool, he noted the bartender. The lovely blonde on point looked like she just might be what he needed with her sleeves of tattoos, low-slung leather pants, and curvy body. Her hair hung in dreadlocks to her waist and was held back from her delicate face with a black bandana. She glanced at him, looked away, then immediately glanced back. She licked her pierced lower lip and made her interest known with a heated glance.

When she'd finished serving her customer, she came over. "What's your poison?"

"Shiraz."

Her brows rose. "Really? Wouldn't have pegged you for a wine drinker."

"No?"

"No. Jameson, maybe. Or Glennfiddich." She poured expertly and set the glass in front of him. "In the mood for something else?"

His fingertips slid lightly up and down the stem of his glass. "Suggestions?"

"I'm off at midnight."

"I'm free at midnight."

Her mouth curved in a sexy smile and she extended her hand. "Sam."

He stroked her palm. "Raze."

He watched her saunter off, admiring the way black leather hugged her lush ass, then he picked up his glass and stared into it. Still fucking brooding, goddamnit.

He smelled the woman who stole his interest from Sam before he heard her.

"*She's not what you want."*

The clipped, no-nonsense female voice stirred something inside him, as did her scent. He savored both a moment before he looked at her, appreciating both her directness and the fragrance she wore, which was light and sweetly floral, a perfect accompaniment to the natural female scent of her skin.

Raze glanced aside at the woman who made herself comfortable in the space next to him. She wasn't his type. Too refined and complicated for his tastes, but there was no denying she was beautiful. Willowy body with modest curves. Creamy skin contrasted by dark hair. Vivid green eyes framed by thick, black lashes. She was an altogether stunning package. "She isn't?"

"No." She hooked one nude stiletto heel on the bar's foot rail and set elegant hands on the carved wooden lip of the bar top. No rings, which he found surprising. She was the sort of prime choice female that didn't remain on the market long.

Raze canted his body toward her. High-class, he thought, noting the Rolex on her wrist and the hefty diamond studs shooting multi-hued fire from her earlobes. In a quick survey, he registered slim gray dress slacks, a sleeveless black silk top, and dark as ink curls piled high and balanced on a long, slender neck.

An image of her came to his mind... sprawled naked and prone across a red velvet bedspread, her graceful spine arching as he slid his parted lips along its curve. Decadent. That's what she was, and decadence was what she needed from the man she took to her bed. A long, slow, deep seduction. He didn't have that patience in him tonight. He'd had blood dripping from every inch of his skin just twenty-four hours ago and he had a cold knot in his gut that ached.

Lifting his glass, he wet his lips, absently noting the building heat in his blood. Not his type, but he wanted her. "*I'm* not what *you* want. Not tonight."

She reached for his glass and he gave it up. Blood was the only thing he could ingest, but he'd learned to tolerate a drop or two of red wine.

Her dark green eyes stared into his over the lip of the glass. She swallowed and made his dick hard. "Shiraz."

"Well done," he murmured, his eyes following the perfect arches of her brows and the sculptured beauty of her cheekbones. With a slow and deep breath, Raze realized every other female in the room had faded into insignificance.

"I have good taste." The intimacy of her smile included him in that statement, while the determination in her eyes dismissed his assertion that they weren't meant to be lovers.

He ran a hand over his head and debated what to do. He was no longer interested in Sam the bartender, but he wanted sex and he needed blood. And the only person he wanted either from was the one standing in front of him—the kind of woman a guy didn't take casually. "You could have any guy in this room. Any guy you want."

"Perhaps." She shrugged and settled on the seat beside him. "But I need you. I'm Kim, by the way."

She extended her hand. They shook in greeting and he gave her his name.

"Interesting." Her eyes sparkled. "Suits you."

Raze inclined his head in acknowledgment, maintaining his hold on her for a moment longer than necessary because he got a charge out of it. He'd chosen the name himself after shedding his angelic one. All of the Fallen had recreated themselves and most minions followed suit—a new name for a new life. "Odd place to hunt for a rough ride."

Her lush mouth curved on one side. "You're not rough."

His brows lifted in silent challenge.

"You're not," she insisted with a smile. "You're fierce and in a dark mood, but not rough. And I wasn't trolling for any kind of ride. I came in here for a drink with friends and had every intention of leaving here all by myself."

She pointed across the room to where three of the small tables had been shoved together to make a grouping for a party of a half-dozen people. The men offered toasts to Raze, lifting their beers high. The women giggled and bent their heads together, speaking intimately. Their good-humored nervous response to him almost made him smile.

"Am I a bet, then?" he asked. "What do you win for having the courage to hit on me?"

"Hopefully, a night with you." Kim took another drink, taking the time to absorb the taste of the wine before swallowing. No liquid courage for her. "I was sitting over there, minding my own business, having a reasonably good time. Then I felt a tingle on the back of my neck. I turned around and there you were. I was just going

to admire you from afar, but then I saw you were trolling and figured why not me? Plus, I really needed to admire you up close."

"You're out of my league." But he was beginning to think that wouldn't be enough to stop him.

She grinned, which belied her hands-off appearance and made her sweetly approachable. "So earn me. I won't mind the effort, I assure you."

"The effort I expend will likely leave you hobbled in the morning," he said harshly. "You have no idea what I need to get through tonight."

Kim studied him for a long moment, taking a deep breath and then another. Something swept over her delicately beautiful features, something warm that briefly touched the chill in his gut. "I'm not into pain. If that's what you need, then you're right, I'm not your girl. But I don't think that's what you're warning me about. You don't want to hurt me; you just don't want to hold back. And that's what I need, Raze—a man who doesn't hold back. That's what kind of mood *I'm* in."

Now it was his turn to study her. "Why?"

"Does it matter?"

"No." Raze dug in his back pocket for his wallet and laid out a hundred dollar bill for Sam. "Let's go."

"I have to say goodbye to the team. Got a preference for a hotel? I'll meet you there."

Smart girl, he thought. He wrote his room number on a napkin and slid it over to her. "The Drake."

"You already had a room? I admire your optimism."

"I'm just passing through."

Laughing, she bumped shoulders with him. "I'm just playing with you, rough guy. Besides, twenty minutes in the bar and you've already got two women willing to go to bed with you, I'd say a little optimism is justified."

Christ. He wanted her. His blood was thrumming through his veins, burning with an excitement he hadn't felt in... well, a long-assed time. Impatient expectation wasn't in his nature. Or so he'd thought.

"Should I bring anything?" she asked, meeting his gaze.

"An overnight bag."

She slid off the barstool and grabbed his wine to take it back to her table. "See you in an hour, Raze."

He grabbed her elbow, squeezed gently. "Make it thirty minutes."

Again, she searched his face. Again, she saw something that settled her. "Forty-five. I'll hurry."

"Hurry faster."

* * *

"Are you *insane*?"

Kim looked at her best friend and shrugged. "Maybe a little."

"Your dad is a cop," Delia reminded, twisting her martini glass back and forth. "Your brother is a cop. You know better than to go home with strange men you pick up in a bar. He could be a serial killer or a sexual sadist or... anything!"

"It's because I've grown up with cops that I know what I'm doing with him." She'd watched the way he walked into the bar. The confident stride, the coolly observant eyes that took in everything, the way he carried his powerful body with limber agility. A hunter. She'd bet money he was undercover vice. Just as she'd bet money that something about his job was eating at him now and he wanted to put it away for a night, take some solace from someone who wouldn't be around long enough to remind him he'd lost his edge for a few brief hours.

Looking back over her shoulder, she remembered watching Raze take a seat at the bar, remembered the way he'd looked into his glass as if the answer he was looking for could be found in it. Wasn't she here for the same reason? To seek oblivion in the company of others. So they'd narrow it down to the two of them, and toss in orgasms and physical exhaustion. There were worse ways to spend the night. Like lying in bed alone, drenched in clammy sweat and shaking with fear.

Delia frowned, her dark eyes filled with worry behind her chic electric blue eyeglass frames. "This sort of reckless behavior isn't like you. You don't want to admit it, but you're still reeling from what happened to Janelle. You're not in the right frame of mind."

Janelle. God. Kim polished off the last of the shiraz. Even though she'd moved into a different apartment in a different building in a different part of town, she couldn't get the memory of coming home to her roommate's murder out of her head. The crazy ex Janelle had been running from for years had finally tracked her down and taken her life, then turned the gun on himself. Kim couldn't close her eyes without seeing it all over again—blood everywhere, splattered over everything, pooling on the floor in a viscous crimson lake. The sharp metallic smell of fresh death had seared her nostrils, indelibly etching a nightmare on her mind.

"I have to go." She dug her business card out of her purse and wrote Raze's name and room number on the back. "If I turn up missing, here's the last place I was."

"Ha! That's not funny, Kim." Delia looked at the others. "Tell her she's out of her mind. Stop her."

Justin looked up as she stood. He shook his head. "Sorry, Dee. She's not changing her mind. She's got the devil in her eye."

"Leave off, Delia," Rosalind said, fanning herself. "That guy was seriously hot. I'm rooting her on. Go, Kim, go. Rock his world. Make him beg."

Delia groaned. "Oh my god, you're all whacked. I'm calling your brother."

"If it makes you feel better," Kim said dryly, bending down to kiss her friend's cheek. "Go for it. See you guys Monday."

"If you're still alive then!" Delia yelled after her. "You sex-crazy maniac."

Kim was smiling all the way to her car, but when she slid behind the wheel her humor was gone. Replaced by a hotter, more pressing emotion. There was a gorgeous, dangerously seductive man waiting in a hotel room for her. A man who was aching and lonely, just like she was. For tonight, at least, she wouldn't have to take a damn pill to fall asleep.

CHAPTER 4

The minute Raze walked into his hotel suite, he felt as if the air had thinned. Being alone was rubbing him the wrong way, which was so opposite from his usual desire for as much solitude as he could wrangle. There was too much stimuli in the world to allow him peace—the pounding of heartbeats, the steady surge of blood in veins, the various scents that betrayed mood and train of thought. He avoided crowds when he could, but now it seemed he was stuck in an odd place where being by himself was more miserable than being around others.

Rolling his shoulders back, he pulled the box of condoms out of a shopping bag and set it on the end table by the small loveseat. He left the new bottle of wine on the dinette table and tossed the bag in the trash, wondering what the hell to do with himself.

He ran both hands over his head and down the back of his neck, growling as he struggled with an unusual sense of anxiety. This time lapse from meeting a lover to fucking her was a step he'd been skipping for a few centuries now. He usually laid 'em where he found 'em, and that worked for everyone. If he'd hooked up with the bartender, it likely would have gone down right there at the club, in the back somewhere, quick and dirty. Waiting for Kim was excruciating, because it gave her time to have second thoughts. He wasn't sure what he'd do if she changed her mind. She'd made him want her. Now no one else was going to do.

Raze moved into the bedroom and plugged his iPod into the docking station, his tension easing a little as Hinder drifted out of the speaker. Feeling confined by his clothes, he began pulling them off. His shirt went first, followed by his boots, then his jeans and boxer briefs. He was tossing his clothes over the back of a bedroom chair when he heard the knock out in the living area.

The surge of lust that hit him affected the steadiness of the first step he took. Then it perversely strengthened his stride. His purpose and focus narrowed to his body's need for the woman on the other side of the door. It was a base and elemental craving, purely physical, but a part of him was distantly aware that it was her bold yet easygoing personality that had tipped the scales enough to tempt him to this madness. She was all wrong for him. So wrong. But he knew when he pushed inside her it was going to feel so damn right.

He pulled the door open. His breath hissed on a sharp inhale at the sight of Kim on his doorstep, dressed in a fitted white tank top and worn jeans that hugged her like a lover. She'd let her hair down, freeing the riotous mass of inky curls to tumble around her slender shoulders and halfway down her back. Her feet were bared by jeweled sandals, revealing toenails that were painted black and big toes decorated with white flowers and swirls. Gold hoops hung from her ears, replacing the diamond studs she'd worn before. He was flattered she'd given thought to how she looked for him.

Presently, however, she seemed focused on looking *at* him.

"Wow," she breathed. "Part of my mind is saying I should be freaking out that you're answering the door naked. Another part is thinking: Holy shit, did I get lucky or what? Don't turn out to be crazy, please. I really need this right now."

The raging need inside him quieted. The soft plea in Kim's voice and the momentary shadow of pain in her beautiful eyes altered the dynamic of his approach. He caught her gently by the elbow and tugged her in. When she cleared the door, he released it to shut by itself and he lowered his mouth to hers.

Swallowing her gasp, Raze slipped his arms around her, stroking his hands up her spine and molding her slender body to his. Her duffle bag hit the floor and her hands came up, one holding the back of his head while the other cupped his cheek.

The tender, encompassing nature of the embrace startled him even as it soothed the ragged edges of his volatile mood. He lifted her feet from the floor, tilting his head to get a deeper seal. His tongue stroked into her mouth, finding the taste of cinnamon and her own natural sweetness. He groaned, ravenous for her, but unwilling to devour. He'd thought he needed hard and fast. She'd thought she needed that, too. They'd both been wrong.

She caught his lower lip between her teeth and tugged, her lips soft and wet, her tongue a velvet lash. He wanted those lips and tongue all over his body. Her hands, too. They were strong and sure, confident. Her moan vibrated against him, luring his fangs to descend.

Not ready for that, Raze set her down reluctantly, his gaze locked with hers. She was flushed and beautiful, her eyes clear and open, yet tinged with sadness. As he watched, tears welled and slipped off her bottom lashes.

"Oh, shit," she whispered, releasing him to swipe at her cheeks. "I asked you not to be crazy and then I get weepy over a kiss. I swear I'm not mental."

"It's okay."

"You like picking up teary, emotional women?"

"You picked me up," he corrected with a smile. "And there's usually only one reason a woman like you picks up a guy like me. I'm not sorry to find out differently."

"You thought I objectified you." She ran a sheepish hand through her black-as-midnight hair. "I can't say you're entirely wrong about that."

"I thought that's what I wanted." Impersonal, with expectations that were easy to meet. But it turned out she was right—what he'd needed was her. Giving her the oblivion she wanted was going to keep him busy in ways a quick and dirty fuck would never have done. There was a connection between them, and he realized he needed that far more than he needed an orgasm.

Obviously, Baron's taunts had dug deeper than Raze had given the man credit for. Women didn't connect with him beyond the physical, he didn't give them enough of himself to get that close. It wasn't deliberate on his part; he just didn't work that way. He'd dealt with infatuation and even sexual obsession that women mistook as love, but it was always fleeting. Quickly come and gone. But Kim... she needed what he was capable of giving. It moved him that for once he could fill a need that was more than skin deep.

Her hand on his face slid upward, her fingers tracing the arch of his brow. "I'm glad I found you."

He pressed his lips to her forehead, wondering what she saw in him that put warmth in her eyes. "Let me put your bag in the bedroom. There's some wine on the table. Are you hungry? Want some room service?"

"You don't have to wine and dine me." She smiled. "I'm a sure thing."

Stepping back, he picked up her duffle. "I'm still going to seduce you."

"I won't complain. I'm just letting you off the hook."

With a sweep of his hand, he gestured her deeper into the room and headed into the bedroom. He was about to pull on a pair of sweats when he glanced into the living area and saw Kim undressing. He moved to the threshold, fascinated by the confident, efficient way she took her clothes off. It was no striptease she was doing, no narcissistic display of her assets.

Raze leaned into the doorframe and crossed his arms. "I was going to put some pants on."

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Why? I think we've both seen each other at our most naked just a minute ago."

"Okay, then." Her open honesty was as arousing as her body. "Come here."

She approached him in the same no-nonsense way she'd undressed, bringing the box of condoms with her. He took her in, admiring the sleek lines of her lithe body and the unaffected sway of her trim hips. The contrast between her dark hair and pale skin was a stunning one, framing a figure that had seemed modest while clothed but was perfectly, lushly proportional in the flesh.

"Why am I not nervous?" she asked when she came to a halt in front of him. "What is it about you that makes me so comfortable? I've never even walked around

my own house naked."

Raze tilted his head to the side, contemplating that. Most mortals who met him sensed the predator he was. It kept them on edge, which is what so many of his lovers found attractive about him—the hint of danger he exuded by his nature. He was a hunter, they were his prey, and they felt it on a subconscious level. That he put Kim at ease in a way she was with no one else, not even herself, was inexplicable. "I don't know. But I like it."

Her mouth curved. "Me, too."

Uncrossing his arms, he reached out to her, lifting a glossy curl and rubbing it between thumb and forefinger. "You're very beautiful, Kim. You're not the only one who got lucky tonight."

"Thank you."

His fingertips skimmed gently down her arm until they reached her hand. He linked their fingers together and backed into the bedroom, pulling her with him. As aroused as he was by her slender body, he was also conscious of the unexpected intimacy of them being so comfortable together. Almost as if there was a longstanding familiarity between them. An affinity so rare he'd never found previously in his endless life.

When he reached the bed, he sat and tugged her between his legs, then he fell backward onto the mattress, taking her with him. As her body flowed over him, then melted into him, Raze closed his eyes and sighed, releasing the abnormal agitation that had been riding him hard. Her hair slid over his skin and her mouth brushed over his parted lips. His entire body was hyperaware of her, every nerve ending tingling in anticipation of her touch.

I was wrong, he thought. Not hard and fast. Not with her. Slow and deep. Decadent. He could give her that after all.

Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled her beneath him and gave her what they both needed.

* * *

Kim wiped her mouth with a napkin. "You've seriously never seen this movie before?"

Raze lay on his side with his head in hand, his gaze moving from the television to where she sat cross-legged on the bed beside him, drowning in his shirt. "Never even heard of it."

"Wow. I love this movie." She stabbed another piece of impossibly tender steak with her fork and lifted it to her mouth, her attention only partially on *The Ghost and the Darkness*. The naked man sprawled across the bed next to her was much more fun to look at. "Patterson went to Africa with a dream and a plan. And then he had to fight to hang on to it. I just love that. Do you like it?"

"I like watching it with you." He smiled and ran a fingertip down the side of her thigh. "I like watching you eat, too."

"I don't know what's the matter with me. I don't usually get hungry after sex, but I'm freakin' starving now." Of course, it wasn't usual for her to have sex for nearly three hours nonstop either. She was pretty sure that if her damn stomach hadn't growled, he'd still be inside her now. The thought made goose bumps sweep over her skin.

"Are you cold?" he asked, displaying that amazing perception she'd appreciated all night. It was the nail in her coffin, she knew. There wasn't a woman alive who could resist a man who paid attention to her, who made her feel like she was the only other person in his world.

"No." She pushed aside the longing that kept reminding her it was there, just under the surface, waiting for her to acknowledge it. "I'm feeling piggy eating while you're not."

"Don't. I'll get something when I need it." He squeezed her gently, then let go. "And you'll need the energy."

Invigorated by the promise of more mind-blowing sex, Kim ate faster. Raze turned his oddly beautiful gaze back to the television, and she let her mind sift through the impossibilities of the evening.

Christ, he was beautiful. It was stunning how gorgeous he was. His features were heartrendingly perfect, from the bold slash of his brows to the strong line of his jaw. His eyes were compelling, the irises lit like amber in candlelight. His lips were sinful, not just in their sensual shape but also with what they could do to the female body. His nose was elegant and his cheekbones a work of art. Everything about him was divine. *Like a fallen angel*, she mused fancifully—blessed with looks that drove every rational thought from a woman's head and totally wicked enough to take advantage of that gift.

She almost sighed like a smitten teenager.

And the best part was that the miracle of him was more than skin deep. Despite his devastating attractiveness, she was as comfortable hanging out with Raze as she was with any of her friends. There was no awkwardness, no wariness, nothing to ruin the easy companionship between them. It was in her nature to be cautious. Not only was that trait necessary for the painstaking work she did, but it was also how she'd been raised by a family of cops. You could never look close enough, dig deep enough, or be careful enough.

But Kim could accept that some people just clicked. She had friends whom she'd known would become valuable pieces of her life from the moment she met them. That didn't explain why she wasn't at least partially scandalized by the things she and Raze had done to each other since she arrived. There wasn't a centimeter of her skin that didn't know the stroke of his fingers or the lash of his tongue. He knew parts of her body better than anyone, better than even she did. And his erotic abandon goaded hers.

She'd lost all inhibition. She had done things to him that she'd never imagined doing and she had loved every minute. There was nothing in her head about playing fair or returning favors. She pleasured him because she couldn't help herself. She pleasured him because it made her feel as good as when he pleasured her. He'd shown her that any sexual act could be intimate and mutually pleasurable if you had the right partner. She didn't think there was anything she wouldn't let him do to her or anything he could ask of her that she wouldn't do to him—a man she hadn't known existed just a few short hours ago.

He glanced at her, caught her staring, and smiled. The curve of his gorgeous mouth was wicked, but the heat in his eyes was tender and warm.

Her chest tightened in a way that warned her she was wading into treacherous waters. Taking a deep breath, Kim set her fork down and wiped her mouth again. "Thank you for dinner."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Wasn't it obvious?"

"I've heard stale chips can taste delicious after sex," he said wryly.

She laughed and stood, collecting her tray off the bed. "I absolutely enjoyed it. I've enjoyed everything since I arrived."

Taking the dishes back out to the living area, she took a moment to herself, debating whether she should get going now while the getting was good. She considered it long and hard, but the thought of returning to her apartment alone at this time of night made her stomach knot. And the thought of leaving Raze bummed her out so much she knew she couldn't go until it was absolutely necessary. It wasn't like they worked together or had the same friends or even lived in the same city. So what if she moped a little after it was over? He wouldn't be around to see it. He wouldn't be around as a constant reminder of what she couldn't have.

"Hey," Raze called out. "Your phone's vibrating."

She went back to the bedroom, which was softly lit and intimately welcoming. It smelled like him and sex and delicious food. She really didn't want to be anywhere

else. Looking around for her bag, she found it on a chair near the closet, several feet away from the bed. "How can you hear the buzzing over the television?"

He shrugged.

Digging her phone out, she looked at the screen and sighed at the sight of her brother's name. She answered without preamble, "It's a little late, isn't it, Kenny?"

"Why the hell aren't you answering your phone?"

"Because I was busy. And it's late."

"Kimberly Laine McAdams. You can't go off with some biker you spoke to for five minutes in a bar and not expect us to be worried sick."

"Oh my god. This isn't Kenny. It's Mom sounding like Kenny."

"That's not fucking funny."

"No, it isn't." She hit the mute button. "Raze. Do you ride a bike?"

He glanced at her with brows raised.

"You know," she elaborated. "Like a Harley."

His grin flashed fierce and sexy as hell. "Heritage Softail."

"Shit." So he was a biker after all. The thought made her hot and needy. Kim took the phone off mute. "I'm a big girl, Kenny."

"Who is still dealing with walking into the murder scene of her best friend!" Ken growled and in her mind's eye she could see him fisting his dark hair with his free hand and clenching his jaw. "You're not the only one who's freaked by what happened to Janelle. I worry about you all the damn time. You need to give me a break, Kim. Stop giving me gray hair. Now what's this guy's name?"

"Why so you can run him? Do you do a run on all your one-night-stands?"

"You're not the one-night-stand type."

"I am tonight. I'll call you when I get home tomorrow. And tell Delia I'm gonna to kick her ass." She hung up, then powered her phone off.

"Everything all right?" Raze adjusted his position so that he was propped against pillows piled against the headboard. Sprawled like that he was a sensual feast.

God. He was just what she'd needed. What she still needed.

She tossed her phone back in her bag and pulled his shirt over her head. "Everything's great. And about to get better."

CHAPTER 5

Raze looked at the video feed of a blackish rose arrangement perched on Vash's desk and pronounced, "Creepy."

"They're for you." She pushed them aside. "Salem found them on your porch about a half hour ago. No card, but we know who it's from, don't we?"

"Yeah, we do."

"She's his wife, by the way. Of a couple hundred years. Torque traced Baron—previously known as John Schmidt, Baron Seagrave in his mortal life—back to the Regency period, when he married Lady Francesca Harlow."

"Torque's the man."

"Yes, he is. And you're dealing with a woman who just lost the love of her life." Vash's fingers drummed on the table. "Take it from a woman who knows what that feels like: She wants your head on a pike and your nuts roasting on an open fire. She won't let this go until one of you is dead."

"I'm ready and waiting." He glanced out the window at the gradually lightening dawn sky, then over at the closed bedroom door. "But I might be waiting in the wrong place if she's gone to Raceport."

"Torque traced the roses back to a florist in Chicago. If she did her homework at all, she'll know you're hanging around there. But she doesn't know where. She's hoping this'll rattle your cage a little."

"I'll get out more today. Be seen. I don't suppose we'd be lucky enough to have confirmation that the baroness is the woman in the video. A photo match, maybe?"

"Working on it." Vash rocked back in her desk chair. "Listen, I know you like to do your loner thing, but I'd feel better if you had some backup."

"Don't worry about me. I've got this."

"When I find the bastards who killed Charron, an army isn't going to save them. Hell hath no fury like a woman whose mate has been stolen from her. You can't understand. You haven't been there. You don't know what you're up against."

Raze's hands fisted. "I've. Got. This."

"Fine." She tossed up her hands. "Watch your stubborn ass. I can't afford to lose you."

She ended transmission, leaving him feeling pissed off and resentful. He was sick of everyone acting like there was an exclusive club that he was denied membership in.

He moved back into the bedroom and slid between the sheets, careful not to wake Kim, who slept soundly. Lying face down with her hair fanned across her back and her face turned toward him, she soothed his agitation without even trying. He wasn't used to having someone sleep over like this. Because he didn't need sleep himself, having a lover stay the night just invited questions he couldn't answer.

Regardless, he wouldn't have let Kim go home even if she'd wanted to. He could tell himself it was because it wasn't safe for her to go out by herself at night. After all, the last woman to leave his bed had found a dead body on the doorstep. He could also tell himself it was because he hadn't fed from her yet, but then he'd have to examine why he'd held back. To create just this excuse, maybe?

Reaching out, he pushed her hair gently aside and ran his fingertips up and down the graceful curve of her spine. She was so slender and delicate, yet strong and lithe. Her body had worked tirelessly through the night, taking what he gave her and giving it right back to him. When she'd risen over him and rocked her body onto his, he'd fisted the sheets against the pleasure, his neck arching as she took him to the edge and beyond. It had been a very long time since anything had felt that good.

Raze exhaled harshly, fighting the onslaught of renewed desire. He'd had her enough already. She wasn't a vampire who could heal quick enough to avoid being sore.

"Umm..." she purred. "You have the best hands."

That soft humming noise of pleasure was the death of all his good intentions. He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "I want you."

"Yes, please."

He laughed, which made her smile and roll to her back, revealing the small breasts he'd played with most of the night. She was revising everything he'd thought he knew about his preferences and desires. He ran the tip of his finger around a pale pink areola. "I love your tits."

"Oh, these things? I've had them forever."

Grinning, he bent over her and took her mouth, slanting his head to get the perfect fit. Kissing was another surprise. He hadn't realized he liked it so much.

He was going to like drinking of her even more.

This time, he wouldn't hold back. The morning was here; their night together was almost over. In a few hours, he'd be out hunting and she'd return to life as she knew it.

Raze slid over her and pushed his arms beneath her. It amazed him that a body so much smaller than his could fit so perfectly. He should have felt like a great, hulking beast on top of her, but he didn't. He should have worried about how he handled her and made an effort to restrain himself, but there were none of those types of concerns or awkwardness between them. It was all so easy. So natural.

Her leg lifted and her foot stroked up and down his calf. Her arms hooked upward beneath his, her hands stroking over the back of his shaved head. He'd never considered his scalp an erogenous zone before, but she made it so. Every inch of his skin was sensitive to her touch, heating and tingling as her fingertips caressed him. She handled him with the care he might have shown her—as if he was delicate and precious.

Her tongue licked across his and he groaned, remembering the feel of it across other places on his body. She gave pleasure with as much abandon as she took it, and he let her. He couldn't help it. Everything she did to him was perfect, circumventing his brain and taking him to that place where he was more animal than man—a creature of sensation and need.

Sliding down, he nuzzled briefly against her throat, then moved lower. He teased her nipples with sweeping brushes of his parted lips and soft, gentle licks. Kim whimpered and tugged his head closer, silently urging him to suckle her, which he would not do. The tender tips were already swollen and he wouldn't hurt her, even if she considered the pleasure worth the pain. Instead he worried the tiny hardened point with the tip of his tongue, fluttering over it like the kiss of a butterfly, before lavishing the same attention to her other breast.

"God that feels good," she gasped, writhing beneath him, her skin heating to the touch. "You could make me come if you quit playing around."

He laughed, something he so rarely did. Squeezing her hip in his hand, he continued his downward progression, his tongue rimming her navel before dipping inside. Her flat belly concaved and a tickled laugh escaped her. The sound delighted him.

With his hand beneath her knee, Raze slid one of her sleek legs over his shoulder, then the other. He cupped her ass and lifted her. His mouth watered; his chest tightened with the anticipation of hearing all the luscious sounds she made while he pleasured her.

At the first long, slow lick, she sighed, her body going lax. "You're so gifted. I'm going to have wet dreams about your mouth for the rest of my life."

His lips curved. He took her with a deep, intimate kiss. Pushing inside her with gentle greed. Listening to her moan as he tongued her slick, tender flesh. Her hips arched, seeking more, and he gave it to her. Lapping through the silken folds like a cat with cream. He circled the tiny knot of her clitoris and stroked over it, relishing the way she writhed and gasped, then begged him to suck. She came with a full-body shiver, gasping his name.

Wiping his mouth on her inner thigh, he shrugged out from under her boneless legs and sat up. He sheathed himself in an unnecessary condom, then nudged her legs wider and sank his hips between them. Fisting his erection, he guided it to her. He paused there, absorbing the heated expectation of the moment. In the hours past, he'd learned how perfect the tight clasp of her body was, how deliciously she held him.

An unexpected but not unwelcome tenderness welled inside him.

His eyes closed as she took the first inch, the pleasure so hot and fierce it misted his skin with sweat. He refrained from thrusting, careful to give her swollen sex the time to accept him. He let her body set the pace, sinking deeper only when she opened for him like an unfurling flower.

"Raze."

Lifting his pleasure-weighted eyelids, he looked down at her, finding her flushed and bright-eyed. Feverish with desire. He cupped her head in his hands, holding her still as he slipped into her to the hilt. He savored the way she trembled around and beneath him, watching her eyes darken as the desire took over. The glance they shared was open and naked, and as intimate as his cock inside her.

"God." Her nails dug deliciously into the muscles of his back. "You're so hard. And big. Jesus, you're so thick and long."

"Umm..." He rolled his hips. "And you're tight as a fist. I pack you full. You couldn't take another centimeter if I had it to give you."

Pushing her heels into the mattress, Kim thrust up at him. "Ride me. I want to come again."

"You'll come until you can't take anymore," he promised, feeling his fangs lengthen within his gums. Lifting his hips, he withdrew then pushed deep again.

"Harder, Raze. Give it to me hard."

Delicate muscles rippled along his length, driving him crazy. Grinding his teeth, he fought the need to fuck her without restraint. He wanted to drag out the moment as long as possible, create memories for both of them of a hungry need so powerful they'd reverberate for years.

"Not yet." He slid in and out, his hips working in a smooth, leisurely tempo. "Slow and easy now. Feel me. Feel what you do to me. How damned hard you make me. As much as I've had you tonight, I still ache for more."

Her head pressed into the pillows, unconsciously arching her neck at the perfect angle for the penetration of his fangs. "Yes. More."

Anchoring her hip with one hand, he fisted her hair in the other, holding her immobile. The pulse in her throat throbbed wildly, her heart pounding as he dominated her completely. His tongue stroked over her madly pumping vein, plumping it. He sucked gently on the skin, bringing it closer to the surface. Her sex tightened around him.

"You feel so good," he groaned, nuzzling the spot beneath her ear. "I could stay right here forever."

"Raze, please... I need—"

The first spasms of her climax fisted his dick and his control snapped. He struck deep into her vein, his eyes rolling back as the intoxicating flavor of her blood flooded his mouth. The ecstasy of his bite burned through her and she screamed, her body quaking with the force of her orgasm.

He was right there with her, coming as hard as if he hadn't come all night, his body inundated with ecstasy and the power of her blood.

Then the deluge of her memories hit him with the force of a sledgehammer to the face.

* * *

Kim lay with her cheek on Raze's shoulder and her arm draped across his hard chest. Her fingers drifted idly up and down the bulge of his biceps. Draped along his side with one leg tucked between his, she listened to the steady beat of his heart and thought about how none of this night had gone as she'd expected it to.

She had set out with the intention of getting drunk, so she could sleep without having to take a sleeping pill. Then she'd seen Raze and figured they'd screw each other into exhaustion. Which they had, but she had pictured more of a rolling, clawing, pounding rut. On the floor maybe. Or the couch if they got that far. She hadn't pictured a bed. She hadn't imagined luxuriating in each other. She certainly hadn't thought about cuddling afterwards.

There's something here, she thought. Something that could become important to both of them.

"Kim." His fingers were sifting through her horribly tangled hair. His other hand was splayed over her back.

"Hmm?" She snuggled closer. Everything about the way he touched her made her feel good. Hell, he'd sucked on her neck and she'd had the orgasm of her life. None of the hickies she'd gotten in high school had ever revved her engine, let alone blown the top of her head off.

"Would you tell me why you cried when you first got here?"

She stiffened, unprepared for the question.

"Shh." He pressed his lips to her crown. "You don't have to."

"No. It's okay." After a shaky breath, she told him, stumbling over the words a little because she hadn't talked about it since the police questioned her. Saying the words brought the painful and horrifying pictures in her mind to life, making her relive the agony of finding her home a bloodbath and her dearest friend lying in the gore like a rag doll. The tears came with the words until she was sobbing violently.

Raze rolled carefully, covering her with his body in a hot, hard blanket of powerful male. He tucked her under him, sheltering her, his cheek pressed to hers and his arms caging her shoulders. The quiet strength of him sank into her, shoring her up. Anchoring her. She didn't have to be strong for him. She didn't have to hide her pain to make it easier for him. She didn't need to shield her grief behind a smile so he'd think everything was all right.

He didn't say anything, which was such a gift. She wondered if he knew that or if it was just his way. His was an old soul. She'd sensed that from the moment their eyes had met.

Eventually, Kim quieted, her heart feeling so much lighter that she might've shed a tear over it, if she'd had any tears left.

"There's a lot of shit in this world," he said, kissing her softly. "I'm sorry you had to experience any of it."

Cupping his cheeks, she lifted his head and looked into his eyes. "You experience a lot of it, don't you?"

"Yeah." He rolled to his back and heaved out a sigh. "I have to wade through some of it today. Can I see you tonight?"

Delight fluttered through her tummy. "Would you like to come to my place? I can make dinner."

He looked at her with those amber eyes and smiled wryly. "I have some unusual dietary restrictions. How about movies instead? I'll bring over one of my favorites and you pick out another one of yours. I'll feed you while we watch the shows."

"Okay."

"Okay? Really? That's good?"

She bent over and nudged his nose with her own, hiding a smile over his startled wonder. One could almost think he'd never planned a date before. "It's great. You're great."

He answered that with an exuberant kiss.

CHAPTER 6

Raze had been wandering around the city for half the day when he picked up a tail. He took a circuitous route to be sure and when he was, he pulled out his cell phone and called Vashti. "Problem."

"Hopefully I've got a solution."

"It's two o'clock in the afternoon and I've got a minion sniffing after me."

There was silence, then a whistle. "Well, that's interesting."

"It's scary as fuck and you know it." Only the Fallen could take sunlight; minions were mortally photosensitive. The only exceptions were minions who'd recently drank Fallen blood, which afforded them temporary immunity that would last seventy-two hours at most. "We have a full accounting of the Fallen?"

"I'll double-check, but I can't think of anyone in that area aside from you."

"Let me know what you hear. In the meantime, I'm going to have a little chat with my shadow and see what I can shake loose." He killed the call and shoved his phone in his pocket.

A group of teenagers exited a store in front of him, clogging up the sidewalk and providing the distraction he needed. Darting behind them, he entered the store and shot out the rear delivery entrance. He found himself in a small alley lined with trash and dumpsters and framed above by fire escapes. Leaping the two story distance to the first escape ledge, Raze settled in to wait, knowing his tail would eventually follow his scent.

Ten minutes later, a tiny brunette stepped out of the shop into the alley. He took a deep breath and smelled vampire. Crouching, he prepared to jump when it struck him that she wouldn't be alone. She would be half of a pair.

He hopped down and blocked the swing of her fist, then shielded his groin when she attempted to take him down with a knee to the nuts. She pressed on, raining blows and kicks, which he deflected with greater speed, his forearms parrying jabs so quickly that to a mortal eye he would've seemed to be no more than a blur. He waited for the perfect opening and took it, stunning her with a blow to the neck and catching her in a headlock. Spinning her around, he caged her with her back to his chest.

He yanked her head to the side and bit deep. Her memories flooded into him along with her blood, giving him all the answers he needed... except for where to find Francesca. The baroness had gone under, contacting her minions via phone or email. His fangs retracted and he was licking the tiny wounds closed when her mate rushed into the alley.

"Behave, Lake," Raze warned her softly, puzzled by some of what he'd read in her mind. "Or I'll tell him about your little piece of ass on the side."

She stilled, breathing roughly.

Her partner, Forest—how sickeningly sweet was the deliberate pairing of *those* names?—froze at the sight of his woman helpless in Raze's arms. "Hurt her and die."

Raze grinned, but noted the shine of feral madness in the minion's eyes. He'd seen inside Lake's mind and knew what these two did on their dates—blood and pain were their aphrodisiacs. "I won't hurt her... yet. But I've got her scent and I've drank her blood. I could find her in the Times Square crowd on New Year's Eve. Think about that."

Forest's hands clenched and unclenched rhythmically. "What do you want?"

"Take a message back to the baroness. Tell her to quit dicking around and face me. I have places to go, rogues to kill. I can't hang around Chicago indefinitely."

"You'd fight a woman? A lady. One of your own kind." Forest began to shift restlessly, licking his lips. His eyes were lit with a sick hunger. It seemed Forest found it arousing to watch his woman manhandled roughly.

It was a terrible fact that the majority of minions lost their minds after the Change. Mortals weren't designed to live without their souls and the Change took that from them. If it were up to the Fallen—who were the source of the dark gift—only carefully selected mortals would be Changed, but vampirism was like a secret shared only with trusted friends, who in turn shared it only with their most trusted friends, and so on. The spread had long ago become uncontrollable as the unstable minions began to Change others indiscriminately. It was Adrian's job to mitigate the fallout, an endless mission that pitted the Sentinels against the Fallen in a contentious battle of wills.

"The baroness is no lady," Raze shot back. "I've watched a video of her slicing an innocent man open—alive—while humming a merry tune. She can do that, she can fight me. So give her my message: I'm not wasting my time hunting someone who hides behind their minions. She's got forty-eight hours to take me on or I'm passing her off to Adrian."

"I'll tell her." Forest smiled with eager malice.

Raze shoved the vampress forward into her mate. "I'll be seeing you two again."

Hopping back onto the fire escape, he climbed to the roof and set off from there.

* * *

"No way." Delia planted herself on one of Kim's kitchen island barstools and shook her head emphatically. "Guys that look like Biker Boy are personality deficient. That's the trade-off for the hotness—they're self-absorbed jerks."

Kim smiled and continued putting groceries away. "You're right. Absolutely. Except for Raze."

"There has to be something wrong with him."

"Yeah... He doesn't live in Chicago."

"He snores."

"Nope." Although she realized she'd never been awake while he was sleeping. "Actually, I'm not sure."

"So that's a maybe. He's an early ejaculator."

Kim laughed until her eyes got teary. "Oh my god... No. Definitely no."

"Being good in bed is a challenge to him. He's a womanizer who views sex like a sport—all technique and no heart."

"He's not the least bit detached. In fact, part of what I loved about sleeping with him was how into it he got. Like having sex with me was toe-curlingly, eye-rollingly good. As for being a womanizer... Yes. Probably. He was going to screw somebody last night. I was just lucky enough that it ended up being me."

"So, there's another con—a pretty big one—right there. Does he talk about himself constantly?"

"He doesn't talk about himself at all."

Delia's sloe eyes narrowed behind her glasses. "Maybe he's married."

"Married to his job. Trust me, I know the type. I lived with two cops."

"Self-centered? You had to spell things out for him to get yours."

"He knew what I needed before I did. He noticed my goose bumps for chrissakes." Kim shut the fridge door and returned to the island, curling her hands around the bullnosed edge. "It's going to sound corny, but it's like he's totally in tune with me. He knew when I was hot or cold. He knew where to touch me, how to touch me, how long to touch me... Jesus, I cried all over him about Janelle and he didn't freak out. He didn't tell me everything was all right or ask me to stop crying. He didn't go into another room or make noises about it being time for me to go."

"Damn it." Delia pouted. "That's so not fair. I blew him off and you reeled in Mr. Awesome Sauce."

"I'd apologize, but I wouldn't be sincere."

Delia smiled. "I'm glad he's not a serial killer."

"Me, too." Although he just might slay her when all was said and done. She'd been thinking about him all day, thinking about things she wanted to do with him, places she wanted to take him. Like her favorite pizza shop. And the Field Museum, where he could see the real lions from *The Ghost and the Darkness*.

"You've got bags under your eyes, Kimmy girl, but you look all happy and glow-y. I'm really glad about that."

"I haven't felt this good in a long time," she admitted, tidying up the countertop because she wanted Raze to like her place and feel comfortable in it. "A part of me thinks that's stupid. I'm a mature, successful, professional woman. I shouldn't have such a crazy mood boost over a guy I've known less the twenty-four hours. But that's the way it is. I needed him and he was there."

Delia tucked a strand of her chin-length hair behind her ear. "What will you do if you still need him after he's gone?"

"I don't know. I guess that'll be up to him and whether he'd like to keep in touch or not."

"When does he leave?"

Kim glanced at the digital clock on her stovetop. "Too soon, whenever it is. I have to get ready. He's going to be here in an hour and a half."

"You could convince him to keep in touch with you." Sliding off the stool, Delia straightened the skirt of her flirty blue dress.

"I don't think anyone can convince Raze of anything once he's made up his mind." Kim's chest tightened at the thought of having even a tiny hold on Raze.

"Think about it. You're not his type. He walked into that bar looking for a back alley screw or something like it. Then you walked up and rocked his world, just like Roz said you would. He let you into his personal space, fed you, took care of you. You've got him already, Kimmy. You can keep him, if you want to."

"If that's true, why did you give me the third degree and say all that stuff about something being wrong with him?"

Delia grinned, and pinched her thumb and forefinger together. "Maybe I'm just a teeny bit jealous. But mostly I wanted to make sure you were thinking things through and not getting blindsided by a gorgeous, dangerous-looking man who's a god in bed."

"You suck. Thank you for caring."

Coming around the island, Delia lifted to her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Kim's cheek. "Have fun tonight. Call me tomorrow and give me all the deets."

"Are you going out tonight?"

"Oh, absolutely. You've inspired me to find my own Mr. Awesome. He's got to be out there somewhere. Hopefully tomorrow I'll have some juicy news to share with you. Wish me luck."

"All the luck in the world," Kim assured her as she walked her to the door. "Thanks for hanging out and shopping with me today."

"I loved it. We should do it more often. Gives me an excuse to augment my own lingerie collection. Bye!"

Shutting the door, Kim engaged the locks and leaned back against the paneled wood, examining her living room as if she'd never seen it before. Her new place was smaller than the one she'd shared with Janelle. She had started over from scratch, replacing everything, including the frames on her pictures. While her previous home had been a riot of color, her new place was softly neutral with occasional dashes of blue. She couldn't bear to have red anywhere.

Imagining Raze in her private space, a place she'd yet to invite a romantic interest over to see, was deeply personal. She could say in all honesty that she couldn't imagine inviting any other guy over to invade it, aside from her coworkers. She really hoped he felt comfortable while he was here. She wanted him relaxed and at ease, open. She wanted him as naked emotionally as he'd been last night. She craved that intimacy as much as she craved his hard, muscular body.

Thinking of the stuff she'd bought on her shopping trip with Delia, Kim smiled.

"I'm not done rocking your world, Mr. Awesome," she murmured, setting off down the hallway to get ready.

* * *

"Forest and Lake got the Fallen blood via a courier delivery this morning," Raze said into the screen of his iPad. "An unmarked blood bag they shared between them."

Vash frowned into the camera. "That's a problem."

"I emailed the info I got from Lake's memory of the package and receipt. Let's hope Torque can track it down to its source."

"Are we looking for a mole here? A minion smuggling out Fallen blood?"

Because the Fallen couldn't be everywhere at once, it was necessary to fortify minions to pick up the slack. All of the Fallen routinely stored blood for that purpose. "We need to look closer at that video of the murder. Not just at who's in it, but where. That body was fresh. She killed him nearby and someone sheltered her while she did it. They also knew me well enough to gauge the best time to dump the body. Maybe that's why she wasn't at the meeting at Wrigley Field."

"She should've gotten back to Chicago before you."

"Not if she was waiting on Fallen blood to take back with her."

Vash growled. "Fuckin' A."

"Yeah..." He glanced at the clock. "I have to go."

"Why? Clue me in. Do you need backup?"

"It wouldn't hurt. We've definitely got some cleaning up to do in this city. But that's not why I've got to run. I have to get ready for a date."

Her brows rose. "Is that what you're calling your suck-and-fucks nowadays? Dates?"

"Shut up. The last I heard, dinner and movies constituted a date."

"Jesus." She slumped back into her chair. "Maybe whatever Grimm's crew has got is contagious and you caught it when you bit Puddle."

"Lake. I'm signing off now, Vash. 'Night."

Raze was out of his chair and moving into the bedroom a heartbeat later. He was dying to get to Kim and he'd have to wander all over Chicago first to be sure he didn't drag a tail with him. If he'd been thinking straight that morning, he would've had her come to him again. Nice and anonymous. If someone was watching the hotel, she'd just look like a guest herself with her bag and direct beeline to a room as if she was a registered guest.

But she wanted him at her place and he wasn't going to disappoint her or make her think he just wanted to get laid by changing the plans now. Last night, she'd made sure to have her own transportation and to meet at a public place when she hooked up with a stranger. To go from that level of wariness to the trust of inviting him over to her private space was important, and he didn't want to fuck it up. He'd just have to be real careful. No problem.

For the first time in a very long time, Raze was looking forward to a beginning rather than an ending, which was the inevitable result of hunting. As he headed into the shower, he was whistling, anticipation a heady warmth in his veins.

CHAPTER 7

When the doorbell rang, Kim felt her stomach flip. Putting a hand to her belly, she took a deep breath, then ran to the door. She looked through the peephole and even through the distortion from the rounded magnifying glass, she felt that same punch of need that had hit when he'd first walked into the jazz club and her life.

She pulled the door open. "Hi."

He crowded her in and kicked the door closed, his mouth on hers before the latch clicked shut. She'd never seen a person move so fast, it stole her breath. Then his passion kept her from regaining it. His lips slanted across hers, his tongue sliding deep and making her shiver. As he bent her backwards, she clung to his broad shoulders, feeling the warmth and strength of him through the cotton of his black T-shirt. Behind her back, the white roses he'd brought her tangled with her hair, but she didn't care.

"Hi back," he growled, nuzzling his nose against hers. "Christ, I missed you all day."

Kim grinned, her dazed eyes noting the way his irises seemed to glow from within. "It's crazy, I know, but it was the same for me."

He released her and thrust the flowers at her. "Here."

She bit the inside of her cheek to hold back a laugh. He looked so sheepishly embarrassed as he awkwardly held out the bouquet. Hoping to put him at ease, she teased, "Roses! How lovely. You totally earned a blow job for these. Thank you."

"Seriously?" Raze's brows shot up. "Well, that explains a lot."

"Such as why so many men make the gesture?"

"Yeah." He scowled. "But it doesn't explain why no one told me the trade-off until now."

She headed into the kitchen to grab a vase. "Probably because you don't need any props to get women; they fall all over you without them. Of course, now that you know, you can check out it for yourself and see what happens."

She jumped as his arms came around her from behind and he nibbled the side of her neck. "You may need to stock up on vases," he purred.

Laying the bouquet on the countertop, Kim turned in his arms and caught him around the waist. "No bribes necessary. I like getting you off that way. I suspect I'm acquiring an oral fixation on you."

His hands pushed into her hair, massaging her scalp. He looked down into her face. "What's wrong with you?"

"Excuse me?"

"There's got to be something. No one's this perfect. Throw me a bone, will you."

The reminder of her conversation with Delia tickled her and her smile deepened.

"I had a nose job." She touched the bridge. "There was a bump here and I had it shaved down. I can't dance. I have no rhythm whatsoever. Can't sing either. Roz says I sound like cats fucking."

Raze erupted into laughter.

She grinned back at him.

He leaned his cheek against the top of her head. "I'm a guy with issues. You could do so much better."

"Maybe I will, when you try the flower thing with someone else."

"Fair enough." Gripping her ass, he hauled her up against him. "How was your day?"

"I went shopping. And bought you a surprise."

"Oh? Lemme see."

"Not yet. And you? Work go all right?"

He nodded and visibly clammed up. "Yeah."

Running her hand over his head, she smiled. "Don't worry. I won't ask."

"Why not?"

"Both my dad and brother are cops. I know the drill. When you can talk about it—when you*want* to talk about it—I'm here. And... I knew something about your job was eating at you yesterday. I understand not wanting to talk about it."

"You peg me for law enforcement?"

"Am I wrong?" she challenged.

Cupping her face, he kissed her. "No. Not really."

She let him back away and resumed putting the flowers in a vase. "Make yourself at home."

"That's easy to do. Your place is as beautiful as you are." His voice faded as he moved into the living room.

Kim leaned heavily into the counter, breathing carefully in and out. He was such a force of nature and her hunger for him was outside the scope of her experience. She'd never had relationship issues, never had any problem with commitment or affection or sexual attraction. But this... It was like being hit with a Mack truck every time. "Did you forget to bring a movie?"

"No." He looked across the open floor plan at her and pulled a DVD case out of where he'd tucked it in the waistband of his jeans at the small of his back. "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours."

"Umm... sounds fun." She carried the flower arrangement into the living room and set it on an end table. "Whatcha got?"

"*The Unforgiven*."

"Huh? Who's in it?"

"Clint Eastwood. Morgan Freeman. Gene Hackman." He handed her the case.

"Oh." Her mouth curved ruefully.

"What?"

"There's something else wrong with me: I'm not a fan of westerns."

His eyes were warm with amusement. "Give it thirty minutes. If you're not enjoying it, I'll entertain you another way."

"I can go for that." *Yum.* She licked her lips.

"And yours?" He crossed his arms and looked sexy as hell. "What are you putting on the table?"

"*Gabriel.* Have you seen it?"

Raze's mouth opened, hung that way for a moment, then closed again. His lips twitched. "Angels?"

She deflated. "You've seen it."

"Probably not the same story," he said wryly. "What's it about?"

"Fallen angels who kick some serious— What's so funny?"

He tried to wipe the smile off his mouth with his hand. "Do they turn into vampires?"

"Who? The angels? No. It's not a comedy, you know. It's dark and gritty."

"Gotcha." But he was clearly still very amused.

"Then again..." She thought about it. "That might actually be a cool story. Maybe some werewolves, too? Like *Underworld* with angels? Could be interesting."

Laughing, he picked her up and spun her around. His delight spurred her own and she found herself laughing with him.

"You're crazy, Raze. You know that?"

"About you." He took her mouth in a breathless kiss.

* * *

Kim ended up liking *The Unforgiven*, as Raze had known she would. He couldn't explain how he knew, it was just there. It was as if she had a rhythm to her, a unique tempo that resonated perfectly inside him. And he'd liked *Gabriel*, as she'd suspected he would.

Synergy, he thought, tightening his arms around her. He lay stretched out on her sofa, barefooted and comfortable. She was sprawled between his legs, her back to his chest, her arms crossed over his. Every breath he took smelled of her, that unique fragrance that was partly a soft floral perfume and mostly her natural essence.

He'd never experienced anything even remotely similar to this casual intimacy. Associations for him had always been necessities—he worked with his teams, he fucked the willing, and he relaxed alone. All of the Fallen had lost their souls when they'd lost their wings, one couldn't exist without the other. But the rest of the Fallen had loved before they fell and he'd wondered if perhaps the ability to know love was something he could've only learned when he'd been whole. Perhaps he had missed his chance.

Clearly, he'd been wrong to think that way. He'd never understood the saying *My heart's not in it*. Why did your heart need to be in anything? Do what you need to do. But now he knew. He'd enjoyed his work, sex, and his solitude, but his heart had never been in any of it. Until, perhaps, now.

Raze pressed a kiss to her temple, marveling at how drastically his life and outlook had changed in a mere day. "You know," he murmured, "now we can say we've known each other days, as in plural."

Her head moved on his chest as her gaze slid from the television to the digital clock on her cable box. "It feels like so much longer than that."

She sat up despite his protests and shifting, moving to straddle him. He watched her, riveted by her elegant sensuality. She was way, way out of his league, but somehow he was making her happy. She caught the pull of her zipper, one that ran from cleavage to waist on the simple but pretty strappy emerald dress she wore.

"Ready for your surprise?" she asked, with sparkling eyes.

"Hmm... A surprise." He gripped her thighs beneath the hem and squeezed. "You're all I need."

"And I'm what you'll get." The dress parted and she drew it over her head.

Jesus. He went hard all over. Her delicate breasts were cupped by mere scraps of green satin framed by black lace. The wisp covering the sweet flesh between her thighs was nothing more than a tease. The whole sparkled with crystals and contrasted beautifully with her creamy skin, dark hair, and peridot eyes. He lost his breath for a moment, along with his brain.

"A surprise," he murmured. "And a gift. God. Kim. You shred me."

Her greedy hands slid up beneath his shirt and her mouth sealed over his. She took him. And fisting her hair, he gave.

* * *

They spent Sunday morning being deliciously lazy, rolling around in bed and talking about their work. Raze could say little about the particulars of what he did, but he told her he traveled a lot and worked in teams occasionally. He told her about Vash and Syre, Torque and Salem, smudging details as necessary to get the gist across. It was easier than he would have thought to talk so much. Kim made it easy by listening attentively and refraining from asking questions he couldn't answer. In return he strove to be as honest as possible under the circumstances. Eventually, he'd tell her everything. After he discussed it with Syre and Vashti.

Kim talked about her job as a medical laboratory scientist and he listened raptly, amazed that of all the people he could've found this depth of connection with he'd found one who spent her days looking at blood. She was, in her own way, as drawn to the vital substance as he was. What were the odds?

She was a trust fund baby, which allowed her to do what she loved for a living. Most of her friends were also her co-workers and Janelle had been her best friend since grade school. As he'd expected, Kim had been engaged once, shortly after graduating from college, but she'd broken it off when she realized she wasn't ready to settle down.

Shortly after ten, she went into the kitchen to grab breakfast and he returned a call from Vashti that he'd missed while indulging in Kim.

"Vash." He kept the video off and held the phone to his ear. "News?"

"The team of six I sent arrived this morning and they're already sweeping through what's left of your list of known Grimm haunts. They have orders to gather what intel they can and pass it along to you. You're primary, so stay available."

"Of course."

She snorted. "You could've been hunting last night."

"Yes. And probably should've been. But it's my time now, Vashti. After all these years, it's finally my time. I'm not wasting it hunting down a crazy bitch who won't be found until she's ready." He heard the doorbell ring and pulled on his jeans. "I rattled her cage yesterday. She'll be crawling out soon, because she'll want to deal with this on her turf and I've threatened to leave. I bet she makes a move by tomorrow, and I'll be out today making myself as easy a target as possible."

"I've emailed the cell numbers of your team. Touch bases with them and—"

Raze killed the call when Kim entered the room with a dozen Black Beauty roses. There was laughter in her eyes and a mischievous smile on her lips.

"I guess this is a hint," she teased. "I'm glad you approve of my oral skills, since I certainly enjoy—"

Shoving his phone into his jeans' pocket, he brushed past her on his way to the front door. "Did those just arrive?"

"Yes. Raze, are you—"

"Lock the door behind me. Don't open it for anyone except me." He was gone in a flash, taking the stairs at the end of the hall, his heart racing with a sick panic. He raced down the single flight of steps to the first floor and skid into the lobby of the apartment complex in his bare feet. The lone elevator car was empty and the doors sat open, but when he turned his head, he saw the logo'd back of the delivery person disappearing out the revolving glass door.

A female. Blond hair tucked up under her ball cap.

Bloodlust hazed his vision. Her ladyship hadn't expected him to be there when she went after Kim and she was arrogant enough to forego the quick kill. She wanted to play, like she had with the Cubs fan.

He pursued, uncaring of his bare feet and chest. She was climbing into the back of an unmarked van when her driver—Lake—saw him. The vampress hit the gas,

sending Francesca tumbling into the interior. Raze dove into the open doorway, tackling the baroness as the van jerked back into the flow of traffic to the blaring of horns and squealing tires.

She fought, her claws raking into his flesh, her fangs bared as she hissed like a wild creature. A gun went off, the bullet whistling by his head. Raze crushed her to his chest and rolled, using her body as a shield against the shooter in the passenger seat. Her ribs cracked in the vise of his grip.

Her scream pierced his ears. As Lake skid around a corner, they nearly fell out of the open van door. Gaining his knees, Raze threw Francesca backwards into the passenger, startling the man into firing. The bullet lodged in her back, her eyes widening with agony. Horrified by what he'd done the man dropped his gun and it slid on the metal floorboard into Raze's waiting hand. He took out the minion with a shot to the head and grabbed Francesca by the wrist, yanking her into him so he could pierce her throat with his fangs.

As her blood pumped down his throat, he caught everything she knew—every plan she'd made, every minion she'd told about those plans. He learned the identity of the traitor who'd been providing her with Fallen blood and he knew how to find the names of those he needed to hunt. Not so many, but that wasn't what disturbed him.

He released her before the silver poisoning from the bullet tainted the blood he drank. She slumped to the floor. Lake screamed and hit the brakes, sending him crashing back into the bench seat.

"Take another step," he warned, straightening, "and I'll kill you slow instead of fast."

She paused, sobbing, standing in the apex of the open door and the body of the vehicle.

Raze gestured her back into the van with a jerk of the pistol. When she returned to the driver's seat, he directed her to drive to Baron's safe house.

CHAPTER 8

Francesca, Lady Seagrave, eyed the big vampire who prowled around the refuge she and Baron had created together and felt the hatred sizzling in her blood along with the silver that burned like acid. He was lost in the recording he listened to on her wireless headphones, his face a mask that revealed none of his thoughts. But he had to hear what she'd heard through the bugs she'd placed in his hotel room. The tenderness and affection that had developed between him and his mortal lover were evident in every word they spoke to each other, every breathless cry and pleasured moan.

It was going to wound him terribly when he lost her, perhaps even break him considering how long he'd gone without anyone being necessary to him.

The crash of something breakable shattering on the floor sent a jolt through her. There were others in her home; two men Raze had called to assist him. They were presently rifling through her things, watching the videos she'd made of certain memorable kills. They watched and listened with such horror, as if it was a surprise that a vampire should hunt prey. That's what was fundamentally wrong with those in power of the vampire nation—they acted like animal rights activists who advocated vegetarianism, an impossible stance when ruling those who could be nothing but carnivores.

Mortals were food and sport. It was a joke that vampires should hide their existence and scrape for scraps to eat when there was so much to be had. The Sentinels were powerful, yes, but Syre had never once made an attempt to break out of their rigid boundaries. Who knew what they could accomplish? She and Baron envisioned a world in which vampires ruled as they should. She hadn't Changed to live like this. What was the point of having so much power if you never wielded it?

Raze yanked the headset off his ears and shot daggers into her with his gaze.

Her mouth curved. "It's my right to take her from you. Baron gave her to you as surely as if he'd introduced you. You wouldn't have been in Chicago to meet her if not for us."

"Were you planning on going through my entire black book?" he shot back. "Taking out every person I've fucked?"

"Oh no," she crooned, nursing her vicious fury like a babe at her breast. "She's special to you. Not like the others. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been at her place this morning. You would've taken what you wanted and left before sunrise. I miscalculated how quickly and deeply you fell for her, but it doesn't matter. She'll die, whether or not it's my hand that kills her. You have so many enemies, Raze. She won't last a minute in the grand scheme of things."

Francesca had to give him credit, his face and body language gave nothing away. But she knew the impact of her words. Tossing her head back, she laughed.

"You're a crazy bitch," he said grimly. "I'm just wondering if you were always psychotic or if the Change warped your brain."

"I Changed for him. We Changed for each other, so we'd always be together and you've taken him from me. And for what? You're as much of a Sentinel pet as the lycans. Now *you'll* lose something irreplaceable. You've finally found what you've been missing and it's about to be ripped from you. I hope you'll see what's done to her. I hope you watch while she's cut and torn and broken. I hope her screams stay in your head—"

There was a split second in which she registered the gun in his hand. And then there was nothing.

* * *

Raze studied the baroness's slumped head with icy detachment. She remained upright courtesy of the ingeniously heinous chair he'd found in her home—a chair with silver-plated spiked manacles at the wrists and throat, and a bottom and back with blades that protruded or retracted via a handle on the backside.

Turning away, he looked around the warehouse loft and considered what she'd left behind. There was an entire bookcase of recorded atrocities stored in jeweled cases. It was a collection that could never fall into a Sentinel or lycan's hands, or questions would be raised that had no good answers. Some of what he'd seen would haunt him for years to come, minions who'd succumbed so completely to bloodlust that they were little more than ravening beasts. Raze wasn't certain there was anything—even the Creator's command that the Fallen live endlessly with their vampiric curse—that could prevent a war if Adrian believed vampires were a threat requiring complete eradication.

After all, Adrian had broken other commandments without punishment.

"This place is a house of horrors," Crash muttered behind him, tossing the disks into a crate to be destroyed. "And they were proud of it. They could've kept all this shit in a cloud or on a hard drive, but they wanted the visual of how many kills they had under their belt."

Raze's phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out. "Raze."

"How extensive is the infestation in Chicago?" Adrian asked without preamble.

His back stiffened. "I'm taking care of it."

"If you think that's going to be enough to put me off, you haven't learned anything about me in the last several eons." The smoothly modulated tone of the Sentinel's voice only made his words more disturbing. "Discovering a few hundred armed minions in a heavily populated metropolis is a big fucking problem. Tell Syre if he can't get a handle on his ranks, I'll take the necessary steps to manage it myself."

"Why don't—"

"You and the six minions who arrived today have forty-eight hours to wrap it up and clear out."

The line died, leaving Raze cursing at an angel who couldn't hear him.

There were times when he thought there was no way to clean up the mess the Fallen had made, times when he thought even damage control was out of their reach. There were tens of thousands of vampires policed by less than four hundred combined Fallen and Sentinels plus a few thousand lycans. The odds were against them in every way.

He'd felt helpless before, but now he had something he couldn't bear to lose. He would hunt down the ones whose names he found here in Baron's safe house, but that wouldn't make Kim any safer. As long as they were connected in any way, she would be a target.

* * *

Back in his hotel room, Raze looked into the video feed of Vash's office on his brand-new iPad and caught her up. "I got the list of Baron's followers off his laptop and most of the team is out hunting them now. They had me tailed from the moment I arrived at the airport. While I was killing Baron at the ballpark, the baroness was here in my room planting bugs."

"So now we know why she wasn't there that night."

"Right. That's what I couldn't get: why the hell did they draw my attention? If they hadn't dumped that body on my porch, we wouldn't be on to them now. Reviving Grimm's doctrine was a ruse. They used it to round up enough minions to put on that show at Wrigley Field, but their real agenda was to get those bugs on me for future intel gathering. We found them in every room of my suite and on my iPad. They planted tracking devices on my bags. They knew every move I made and would have continued to know, if she hadn't fucked up and gone after Kim this morning. The baroness hadn't planned on my being there."

Vash pushed her hair back from her face and looked grim. "I hate to say it, but your Kim is going to be a problem for you, unless you're planning on Changing her

and taking the risk that she won't lose herself in the process. You've made a lot of enemies over the years."

Everything inside him recoiled at the thought of losing Kim in any way, by his actions or someone else's. "That hasn't escaped me. But I wasn't their only target. They had rudimentary plans to lure you and Salem out, too, using one of Salem's old hunts—like they did with me—and data on Charron's killers for you."

"Well, fuckin' A." Her amber eyes were hard and cold. "They're lucky they went with you first. They wouldn't have liked dealing with me."

"I thought the same thing," he said wryly. "In a related matter, Adrian called me today. He's ordered me and the team out of Chicago by Tuesday. To say he's not happy about armed minions in the city would be an understatement."

"Fuck him and the high horse he rides," she snapped.

He smiled. "You're just pissed because he's got us by the balls with this one."

"Whatever. The fucker shouldn't always be right." She took a deep breath. "Listen, I don't want to distract you from what you're doing, especially while you've got Adrian breathing down your neck, but... Nikki's gone missing."

Raze froze. Torque's wife. "What do you mean by 'missing'?"

"She was supposed to pick up Torque in Shreveport last night but she never made it."

"You'll need me." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. But take care of what's on your plate there first. We need to put a lid on that mess and I need your head in the game when you get back here."

"Keep me posted."

"Of course."

He signed off and stood, methodically packing up his things. There wasn't much.

"The room is yours," he told Crash. "I'll call you when I get out in the field. I have something to take care of."

Crash waved absently, his attention riveted to the data on Baron's laptop.

* * *

Raze had barely knocked on Kim's door when it was yanked open and she threw herself into his arms.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, pressing her face into his chest.

With one arm around her waist, he lifted her feet from the floor and carried her into the apartment, closing them inside by leaning back against the door. "For now."

What a lie, he thought. Everything was far from all right. No matter what he decided, it was going to be painful for both of them.

She searched his face for answers. "Talk to me."

He dropped his bag on the ground and wrapped his arms around her, engulfing her in the strength and heat of his body. "I brought my crap to your door, Kim. And then I came back anyway."

"Damn right you came back." She had the same look of determination on her face that she'd had when she picked him up in the club. "I would've hunted you down if you hadn't."

"You wouldn't find me." And god, it killed him to think of her trying to. Because he understood the drive, the need and hunger to be near each other. It's what brought him back to her even when he knew the best thing for both of them would be for him to walk away completely.

"Try me," she challenged grimly. "If you want to go because you don't feel anything for me, that's fine. I won't make it difficult for you. But as long as I think you're taking the same ride I am, I'm not letting you get off easy."

He pressed his cheek to hers, swamped with wanting her, with wanting *this*—the sense of being right where he should be. He carried her to the couch and sat, arranging her so that she straddled him. She draped her arms over his shoulders and leaned back, affording him the opportunity to drink in the sight of her. She wore blue jeans and a loose V-neck T-shirt, looking soft and sexy and beautiful.

"Am I in danger?" she asked. "Is that what the roses were about? Is that what you're kicking yourself over?"

"Not immediate." Raze's fingers shifted into her hair, pushing it back from her face. "But as long as I'm with you, it's always going to be hovering in the background. You don't need any more traumas, Kim. You've had more than your share already."

"I come from a family of cops. I'll be okay." She cupped the back of his head, making sure his gaze stayed locked with hers. "It's good you came back, Raze. Whatever else you may think, whatever else is going on, it's important that you came back. It was the right thing to do."

He hugged her again, running his hands up her spine to mold her into him. "I've got work to do today and I didn't ask you first, but I gave up my room and brought my stuff here."

"Good."

"You say that now, but you don't know what I am and I can't tell you until I'm given permission to."

"You tried warning me off the night I met you, remember? And it didn't work, even when you were just a seriously prime piece of beefcake." Kim squeezed him hard. "It's not going to work now that I'm invested."

"You don't know what I do. You'll need to know. I'll need to tell you when I can, but I have to leave soon. No later than Tuesday. And I don't know when I'll be back. It could be weeks. Months."

"Just so long as you come back. Promise me that. That's where we'll begin. We have the phone and internet. We can video conference. It won't be the same as touching you, but at least we're not giving up."

His head fell back onto the sofa cushion, his eyes trained on the ceiling but not seeing it. "I'm going to be honest and tell you what's running through my head. Dropping this now would be the best thing for both of us. We've had a couple days together. A week from now it won't seem as intense. A few months down the road, it'll be a fond memory. That's the easy way to go."

"You're absolutely right." She took a deep breath. "I was thinking the same thing while you were gone. I was rehearsing what I'd say to you, how to put across that I'd had a great time but the weekend was enough for me. There's something here, we both know that, but it's just a spark right now. With a little time and a little distance, it'll burn out."

He exhaled harshly. "Yeah."

"But then I realized I'm not okay with that." She was staring at him when he lifted his head to look at her. "Because I don't know if I'll find that spark again. I don't if it would be the same if I did find it later. What if this is it? What if you're the best thing that ever happened to me? Am I going to spend the rest of my life wondering what could have happened if I'd been strong enough to try? I don't want to live with those questions haunting me."

"I'm pretty sure I'm the worse thing that's ever happened to you," he muttered. "Let's clear that up now."

"And I'm pretty sure you could turn into a werewolf during full moons and I wouldn't care."

"What?"

"Or maybe a troll on Wednesdays? Maybe you're a vampire, and that's why I haven't seen you eat."

"Christ." He couldn't help it; his lips twitched with the urge to laugh. Which was just part of her magic. He was a different person with her. And he liked being that guy. Liked being *her* guy.

"Ha!" Kim's eyes sparkled with mischief. "I spend most days examining bodily fluids, which a lot of people think is gross. We all have our blemishes. And we're not talking about marriage here. We're talking about taking a chance. Making a few phone calls. Sending a few emails."

She nuzzled his nose with hers, a playful gesture that no one else would dare to make with him. His lungs seized with a terrible yearning. Tilting his head, he kissed her, drinking her in. Her lips were soft and sweet beneath his; her returning kiss was deep and slow. Savoring.

"What do ya say, rough guy?" she murmured against his mouth. "Wanna take a chance on me?"

"Yes." Raze took her mouth again. "Yes. Fuck. But I have to go now. I have to work."

"But you'll be back."

He fisted his hand in her hair and nodded. "I'll be back."

###

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* * * * *

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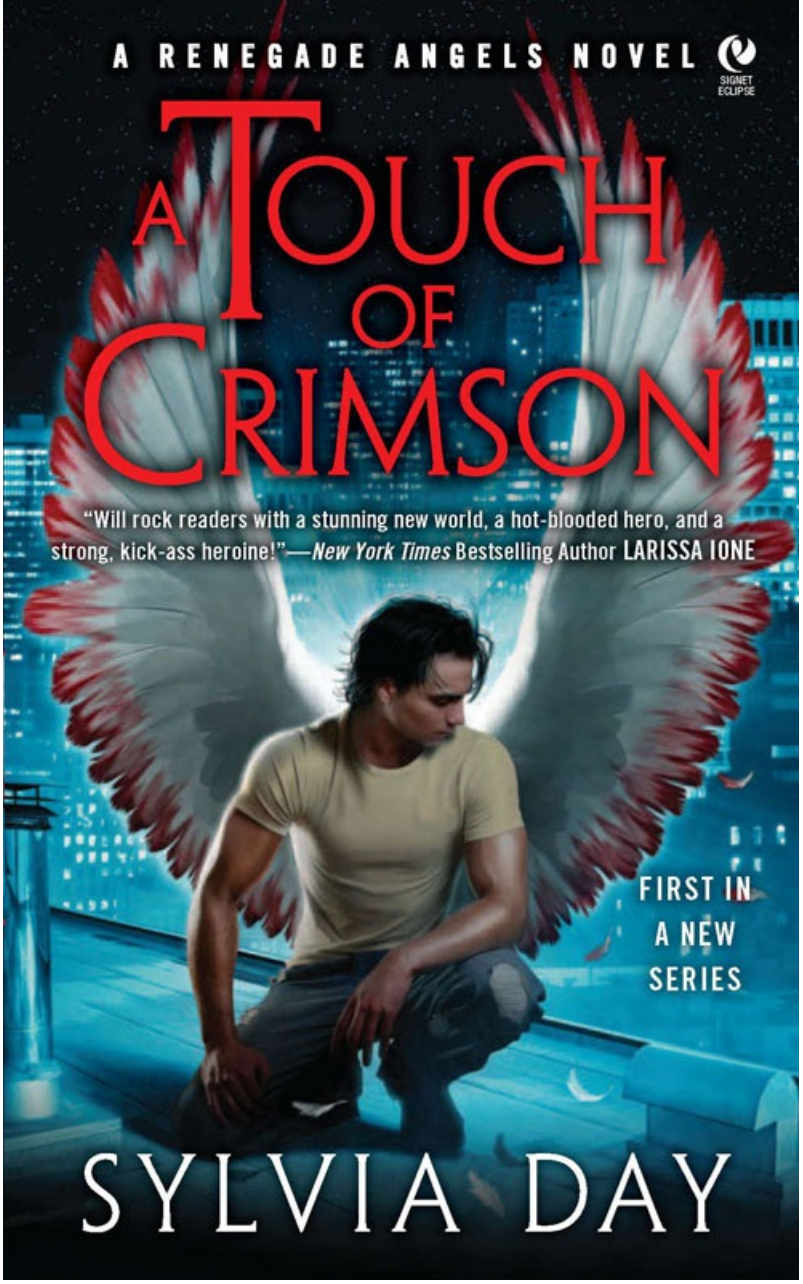
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